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SOVIET INTENTIONS

The C.I.A.'s Great Debate

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The concept of a monolithic American intelligence community which moves with one voice and makes irrefutable conclusions based on vast technological and human resources has been eroding ever since the Iranian revolution caught them by surprise in the winter of 1978-79. The mixed reviews they have received over their predictions and advice regarding the Afghanistan invasion has further challenged any notions of infallibility.

Ignored in most of the commentary on "intelligence failures," however, is a basic issue that has caused a deep schism among key analysts for more than a decade—the intentions of the Soviet Union. Only the analysts, reviewing covert information from ingenious listening devices and spies, are expected to give their final estimation to the President. But it turns out that they don't know any more than the rest of us—or at least have the same disagreements over such issues as the usefulness of the SALT II treaty and Russia's next step after taking Afghanistan.

No document has shown this schism more clearly than an internal Central Intelligence Agency paper coded "Top Secret Umbra" and entitled: "Understanding Soviet Strategic Policy, Objectives." The relatively dry but erudite account of splits in the community over this issue was authored by a C.I.A. analyst, Fritz Ermarth, and disseminated to about 100 top policy makers on December 8, 1975, in the *National Intelligence Daily*, a supersecret newspaper. The unprecedented decision to publish such an analysis immediately after the appearance of the "National Intelligence Estimate," which represented the community's consensus on the subject that year, was explained by the editors as an attempt to air "the spectrum of arguments that specialists in the intelligence community had to deal with in reaching the estimate's key judgments."

Insiders agree that Ermarth's analysis still holds up and reflects even more accurately the "groupings" of analysts over the Afghanistan situation today than it did for those on the SALT II debate at the time. Ermarth, who is now a high-level strategic adviser on the National Security Council, began:

> The subject of Soviet strategic policy and objectives is very elusive. Pertinent evidence is voluminous; but it almost never speaks for itself. Interpretation of the evidence always involves our preconceptions about the Soviet Union as a nation, international politics, the meaning of military power and the condition of our own country.

Because of their sometimes limited access to secret Russian documents, Ermarth observes, U.S. analysts "do not have complete and explicit intelligence" on Soviet military doctrine. "Although we differ on important details, analysts inside and outside the U.S. intelligence community tend to agree on the broad outlines. . . . Soviet doctrine clearly postulates that war-waging forces are desirable for both deterrence and conflict, emphasizes counter-force capabilities and targeting, and stresses the value of preemption as well as the need to have a survivable retaliatory capability."

Where the analysts divide, however, is on the questions of the sway of the military in the Politburo and the importance Soviet leaders attach to military doctrine. Continues Ermarth:

> Where we differ most is on how important doctrine actually is for Soviet policy or how well it reflects the actual thinking of Soviet leaders.
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> Some of us believe that it is quite literally prescriptive for and descriptive of Soviet behavior. They point out that the Soviets have serious deployment or R&D [research and development] programs in all areas required by their war-fighting strategic doctrine. Whatever the obstacles, the Soviets keep plugging away at the requirements of doctrine, perhaps only falling back temporarily when technological problems are severe, as in the ABM [anti-ballistic missile] area.
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> Others tend to regard Soviet doctrine as much less prescriptive for actual military policy. They see in it a good deal of pretense and exhortation really intended to support troop morale, ideological prejudices, and parochial service interests. They point to the quasi-religious themes of "victory" and "superiority" in the literature as examples.
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> They believe that Soviet political and military leaders are free to ignore doctrine when they make practical decisions, as these leaders have habitually ignored or manipulated the ideas of Marx or Lenin. In this view, Soviet decision-makers admit to themselves that attaining the requirements of doctrine is vastly more difficult than pontificating on them.

As for assessing the *role* strategic power may play in any Soviet foreign policy move, that too is difficult, according to Ermarth, because "again we have to start with ambiguous evidence and divergent interpretations." But he is able to narrow down the divisions into two rough groupings:

> Some of us believe that the Soviet acquisition of overall strategic equality has given the USSR a new platform from which to exploit opportunities and to press its global interests, even to the point of accepting strategic confrontation with the U.S. They believe that the political role of strategic power impels the USSR to increase that power which will, in turn, give the USSR even greater sway in the world.
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> Others take the view that at present levels the two sides' strategic forces tend to cancel each other out and that, always cautious, Soviet behavior in potential confrontation areas will be governed primarily by local risks and opportunities. Those of this opinion believe it to be not only objectively true, but also to be shared by the leaders of the USSR.

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